# PROFICIENCY LEVEL AND
# LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGY CHOICE OF
# ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY LEARNERS IN INDONESIA

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**Abstract:** This study explores the relation between language proficiency level and language learning strategy choice of EFL learners at an Islamic university in Indonesia. Two hundred and eighty four participants classified based on their proficiency levels (high, medium, and low) as determined by their achievement results completed the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) version 7.0 questionnaires. The findings indicated that there was a linear relationship between proficiency level and strategy use; the higher the proficiency level, the higher the number of strategies employed. Furthermore, it was also found that higher proficiency level learners tended to choose meta-cognitive strategies; they usually managed learning by conscientious planning, monitoring, and evaluating their own learning. The findings also demonstrated that low proficiency level learners were inclined to choose affective strategies, meaning that they were concerned with the emotional requirements such as confidence. The findings of this study provide contribution to further development of existing global theories about language learner strategies, and are beneficial for classroom practice in the Indonesian context, especially in raising EFL teachers' awareness about ways in improving student learning.

Studies on second language acquisition (SLA) have suggested that success in language learning is dependent upon the contribution of individual efforts and

active involvement in learning and using the language (Lamb, 2004; Marwan, 2016; Rubin & Thompson, 1982). One of the most important individual efforts in learning a language is to develop and use helpful language learning strategies (LLS) – with examples being language learning attitudes and behaviors which are defined as "the conscious thought and actions that learners take in order to achieve a learning goal" (Chamot, 2004, p. 1) and "actions undertaken by a language learner to influence the process of second or foreign language acquisition" (Grainger, 2012, p. 484).

Much research has indicated that LLS play an essential role in language learning process. They represent one of the most critical components in language learning (Oxford, 1990). According to Oxford (1990), LLS are "especially important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed movement, which is essential for developing *communicative competence*" (p. 1). This endorsement would suggest that LLS can be helpful for learners as they may help them improve their ability or proficiency in using the language correctly and appropriately, be it spoken or written; learners may further be able to develop their communicative competence through the use of LLS. LLS can also help learners become successful learners since they can retrieve and use information when they need it, and this can help them to develop confidence and increase their proficiency in using the language (Oxford, 1990; Rusnadi, 2014). This view is supported by Qingquan, Chatupote, and Theo (2008), who state that research on LLS has indicated that language proficiency, especially overall achievement, is closely related to the chosen level of strategy use.

Given the fact that LLS are very important in language learning as illustrated before, a lot of studies have been conducted on the use of LLS in numerous countries. Some studies have shown that the use of language learning strategies is relatively related to several factors such as gender, proficiency level, motivation, major of study, setting and learning context of the research (Grenfell & Macaro, 2007; Griffiths, 2003; Hayati, 2015; Idham, 2014; Mirsah & Muin, 2014; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Rusnadi, 2014; Wharton, 2000). Within the Indonesian context of English learning, there were, however, few studies on LLS focusing on the tertiary level of learners that can be located in the literature, especially LLS use by gender, proficiency level, and year level of study (see, e.g., Annurahman, Kurniawati, & Ramadhiyanti, 2013; Hayati, 2015; Idham, 2014; Mirsah & Muin, 2014; Mistar, 2001; Rusnadi, 2014; Wahyuni, 2013). Thus, there has been limited information about the ways Indonesian

learners approach their learning. As a result, teachers may encounter difficulty developing curriculum and designing appropriate activities that meet the needs of learners with different proficiency levels.

LLS are broadly considered as steps or actions learners take to enhance their learning of another language. Various definitions of LLS (e.g., Chamot, 2004; Griffiths, 2003; Oxford, 1990) address a range of aspects of interest and importance of LLS. Although all are generally accepted in the field of LLS research, none of the definitions capture the full extent of the complexity of the concept of LLS, which has been deemed "notoriously difficult to define" (Griffiths, 2008, p. 83). This is not surprising because learning a language is a complex process, and capturing it through simple definition is rather ambitious, if not impossible. The complexity is also reflected in a large number of LLS that have been identified in the past few decades. Trying to make sense of these strategies has led to a number of proposed classification systems (see Hsiao & Oxford, 2002) because there is no consensus as to which classification offers an optimal and comprehensive picture of LLS. One of the frequently cited classifications was that proposed by Oxford (1990), which consists of two broad categories of strategies that contribute directly and indirectly to language learning. Direct strategies are those that help learners to learn the target language "directly", while indirect strategies support and manage the language learning process without directly involving the target language (Oxford, 1990). Oxford has further classified direct and indirect strategies into six main categories: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. Oxford's LLS classification and her Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) have been used extensively in international LLS research. Her work is viewed as a comprehensive, systematic model of LLS (e.g., Ellis, 1994; Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Radwan, 2011).

The EFL version of the questionnaire has been translated into more than 20 languages, including Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Korean, Russian, Spanish, Thai and Ukrainian. However, only a handful of studies using SILL to investigate the LLS of EFL learners in Indonesia have been reported. It is important then to further investigate this issue to gain a greater understanding of LLS across cultures and languages because one of the criticisms of using questionnaires is that large and general learner strategy inventories such as SILL are not readily transferable across socio-cultural domains (Crookes, Davis, & LoCastro, 1994; 1995). Nevertheless, individual reports are valuable

not only for the target group of learners and their context, but also to contribute to a larger international perspective on LLS use. Thus, SILL has been used extensively and serves as a common tool for measuring LLS use across languages and cultures. It is a useful measure to provide a basis for understanding LLS patterns in a range of socio-cultural contexts and has been used to investigate relationships between language learners' patterns of LLS use and factors such as gender, age, language proficiency levels and year level of study (see, e.g., Hayati, 2015; Mirsah & Muin, 2014; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; Rusnadi, 2014; Wharton, 2000).

Most studies on LLS using SILL have constantly found a linear relationship between the frequency of strategy use and language proficiency levels in which the higher the proficiency level, the more strategies were employed (Idham, 2014; Javid, Al-thubaiti, & Uthman, 2013; Magogwe & Oliver, 2007; Radwan, 2011; Riazi & Khodadi, 2007; Wahyuni, 2013; Zhou & Intaraprasert, 2015). This pattern of strategy use includes the overall strategy use, the six main categories and the use of associated strategy items. For example, Javid et al. (2013) who conducted a study in Saudi Arabia found that the higher language proficiency level learners used more strategies than their peers at the intermediate and elementary levels. This is supported by a study in Indonesia by Wahyuni (2013) who found that advanced level learners used more strategies than their lower-level peers at the intermediate and elementary schools. Similarly, Zhou and Intaraprasert (2015) who conducted a study in China found that higher proficiency level learners employed strategies more frequently than learners at a lower proficiency level. These findings confirmed the work of Idham (2014) who found that the higher the proficiency level, the more strategies were employed. Oxford (2011) argued that a "more frequent use of learning strategies was related to the learner self-perception of high English proficiency" (p. 180).

While most studies above have demonstrated a linear relationship between strategy use and proficiency levels, a number of other studies have further demonstrated a curvilinear relationship between strategy use and proficiency levels (see, e.g., Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Kazamia, 2003; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; Philips, 1991). Hong-Nam and Leavell (2006) who conducted a study in a Southwestern University in the USA found that students at the intermediate level employed more strategies than those at the beginning and advanced levels. Similarly, Kazamia (2003) who investigated Greek EFL learners found that intermediate level students employed more strategies than students

in upper intermediate levels. These findings have indicated that higher proficiency level learners may use less strategies than students at lower level, but they still use the strategies effectively and appropriately (Cohen, 1998). These differences in the findings related to the pattern of strategy use have also been noted in studies that focus on the choices of strategy use in the six main categories and other associated strategy items identified by the learners.

Interestingly, studies related to the use of the six main categories of LLS in the SILL, at different proficiency levels, have displayed consistent results with profiles of the strategy use. Several studies, for example, have noted that all three proficiency levels favored meta-cognitive strategies (Chuin, & Kaur, 2015; Hayati, 2015; Idham, 2014; Magogwe, 2005; Radwan, 2011). Similarly, Radwan (2011) who conducted studies in Oman found that both proficient and less proficient learners used meta-cognitive strategies at a high frequency. In addition, Magogwe (2005) who conducted studies in Botswana found that all three proficiency levels (*good, fair*, and *poor*) tended to choose meta-cognitive strategy categories the most. Hayati (2015) who conducted a study in Indonesia also found that the students preferred to use meta-cognitive strategy category the most.

While these above studies have indicated that learners of all proficiency levels were in favor of meta-cognitive strategy use, a number of studies have also demonstrated that only high proficiency level learners have employed meta-cognitive strategy at the high frequency, with middle and low levels of learners employing different strategy categories (Gharbavi & Mousavi, 2012; Khalil, 2005; Lee & Heinz, 2016; Peacock & Ho, 2003; Riazi & Khodadi, 2007; Wahyuni, 2013; Yang, 2010). For example, Yang (2010) who conducted a study involving *high, intermediate* and *beginning levels* of 300 participants in a University in Korea found that high proficiency level students tended to choose meta-cognitive strategies, intermediate level learners tended to choose compensation strategies, and beginning level learners employed compensation strategies the most. Similarly, Wahyuni (2013) who conducted a study in Indonesia found that advanced learners were in favor of meta-cognitive strategies, whereas *intermediate* and *elementary* learners favored compensation strategies. A current study conducted by Lee and Heinz (2016) in Korea also found that the advanced learners employed meta-cognitive strategy categories at the most.

In terms of learner choices in the use of associated strategy items in the SILL, different proficiency levels proved in favor of different associated strategy items. For example, Wahyuni (2013) found that advanced learners tended to

use *circumlocution or synonyms,* while intermediate level learners tended to choose *finding out about language learning*. However, elementary level students showed a tendency to choose *paying attention* as an associated strategy item that was employed the most. Chuin and Kaur (2015) who conducted a study in Malaysia also found that the students under study chose *paying attention* at the highest frequency. In another study, Yang (2010) found that higher proficiency learners tended to choose *remembering new English words or phrases by remembering the location*, while lower proficiency levels preferred to use *saying or writing English words several times*. These different choices of associated strategy items have been deemed essential due to both the availability of the strategies and the preferred pedagogical practices of the teachers (Oxford, 2011; Wahyuni, 2013; Yang, 2010).

The literature review above has presented relevant studies on strategy use by learners of English. Such information is very important as the basis for supporting another study related to strategies used by different proficiency levels from a different setting. In other words, the present study is worth conducting in order to provide better theoretical understanding of LLS from a different context. This study is thus intended to examine the profile of LLS use by Indonesian university students, particularly at an Islamic university, for classroom practice.

**METHOD**

Two hundred and eighty six students pursuing undergraduate degree in an EFL teacher education faculty at an Islamic university in Indonesia volunteered to participate and completed the SILL questionnaire consisting of 50 items translated into Indonesian. These items were part of six LLS main categories (memory, cognitive, compensation, meta-cognitive, affective, and social strategies). The participants were classified into three different proficiency levels, namely, high, middle and low based on their Grade Point Average (GPA) (Al-Buainain, 2010; Radwan, 2011; Yılmaz, 2010). Yilmaz (2010) classified learners by GPA as *good* (3.5–4.0), *fair* (2.5–3.4), and *poor* (less than 2.5). High and middle proficiency levels were noted as representing successful learners, and low proficiency levels were representative of less successful learning.

Descriptive statistics using means, frequencies, percentages, and standard deviations were employed to identify overall frequency of strategy use in the six categories and associated strategy items. In line with the majority of studies

on LLS, this study adopted the three frequency criteria proposed by Oxford, which involved assessing the degree to which the strategies were used, namely: high frequency use (5.0–3.5), medium frequency use (3.49–2.50), and low frequency use (2.49–1.0) (Oxford, 1990, p. 300). An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine the strategies used at the three proficiency levels. SPSS Version 22 was used in these analyses (SPSS, 2013).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Overall Strategy Use

The overall frequency of strategy use in the six categories and the associated proficiency levels are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Overall Strategy Use in Three Proficiency Levels**

| Proficiency Level | N | Mean of Strategy Use | Std. Deviation | F | Sig |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Low | 10 | 3.69 | .56 | 5.85 | 0.003 |
| Middle | 190 | 3.82 | .41 | | |
| High | 84 | 3.99 | .39 | | |

The ANOVA results indicate that proficiency levels have had a significant effect on the overall use of SILL strategies (F (2,281) = 585, p < 0.05). Accordingly, there are significant differences in strategy use among the three different proficiency levels; this, in turn, indicates that one's proficiency level can influence one's use of LLS quite significantly. In order to accurately identify the significant differences between groups, Tukey-LSD post Hoc has been run, and the results are summarized in Table 2.

As indicated in Table 2, the results of the Tukey-LSD Pos Hoc test demonstrate that there are significant differences between the low and high levels (p = 0.03) and the middle and high levels (p = 0.00). However, there are no significant differences between the low and middle levels (p = 0.35). In terms of the mean score differences, it is noticeable that the high proficiency level mean score is 3.99 with an SD of 39, which is higher than the middle and low proficiency levels. Furthermore, the middle proficiency level mean score is

3.82 (SD = 0.41), and this is higher than the lowest proficiency level (M = 3.69, SD = 0.56). This means that the higher the proficiency levels of the participants, the more strategies they employ. In other words, this shows a linear relationship in which high proficiency level participants are shown to use more SILL strategies than middle proficiency level ones. In addition, middle proficiency level participants employ more SILL strategies than lower proficiency level ones.

**Table 2. Tukey-LSD Test and Overall Strategy Use**

| (I) Proficiency level | (J) Proficiency level | Mean Difference (I-J) | Std. Error | Sig. | 95% Confidence Interval | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| Low | Middle | -0.12 | 0.13 | 0.35 | -0.39 | 0.14 |
| | High | -0.29 | 0.14 | 0.03 | -0.56 | -0.02 |
| Middle | Low | 0.12 | 0.13 | 0.35 | -0.14 | 0.39 |
| | High | -0.17 | 0.05 | 0.00 | -0.27 | -0.06 |
| High | Low | .29* | 0.14 | 0.03 | 0.02 | 0.56 |
| | Middle | .17* | 0.05 | 0.00 | 0.06 | 0.27 |

\* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level

The linear relationship among the proficiency levels, with regard to the SILL strategies used in this study, supports the findings from previous studies in LLS (Magogwe & Oliver, 2007; Radwan, 2011; Riazi & Khodadi, 2007; Wahyuni, 2013; Zhou & Intaraprasert, 2015). The linear relationship found in this study and in the other studies mentioned indicate clearly that proficiency levels influence participants in their use of LLS. This is in line with Oxford and Nyikos (1989, p. 295) who argued that "language proficiency can either be the effects or the causes of strategy use". This is also emphasized by Prakongchati (2007) who stated that proficiency and strategy use can influence each other in which active use of strategy can reach higher proficiency.

The linear relationship found in this study indicates that the more proficient the learners, the more frequent the use of strategies, and this has confirmed the view put forward by Oxford (2011). She argued that the "more frequent use of learning strategies was related to three learner factors: strategy

awareness, perceptions of the importance of English, and self-perception of high English proficiency" (p. 180). It can be inferred that the higher the proficiency levels of learners, the more frequently they are prone to using strategies in their language learning, and thereby, the more aware they are of the strategies they need to employ in order to improve their English learning (Alhaysony, 2017).

This awareness of the efficacy of strategy use is also evident in the students' use of the six categories of the SILL in this study, in addition to the strategy use identified in the data of the three proficiency levels. Furthermore, the students in this study reveal which strategy groups they favor more. This latter point is in line with the findings of Green and Oxford (1995), wherein "the learners at different levels of proficiency (proved) likely to use different kinds of strategies, partly because they (were) dealing with various kinds of materials and situations" (p. 292). The strategy groupings chosen by different proficiency levels, in this study, are elaborated in the following sub section.

**The Most and Least Used Strategy Groups by Different Proficiency Levels**

In terms of the strategy groups evident in the six broad categories identified in this study, the results in Table 3 have indicated that the low proficient level students tend to use mainly affective strategies (M = 4.07, SD = 0.58) and fewer compensation strategies (M=3.22, SD=0.73); middle proficiency levels tend to use mainly meta-cognitive strategies (M = 4.15, SD = 0.50) and less compensation strategies (M = 3.46, SD = 0.63). The high proficiency level students tend to focus mainly on meta-cognitive strategies (M = 4.30, SD = 0.46) and less on memory strategies (M = 3.82, SD = 0.41). These findings are significant because they show that the higher proficiency level learners employ mainly meta-cognitive strategies indicating that they are able to manage their own learning by planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning; this approach proves very useful in successful learning (Oxford, 1990). In contrast, the low proficiency level group tends to use affective strategies, which implies that this group of learners try to encourage themselves in learning, for example, by lowering their anxiety, and keeping themselves aware of their emotional temperature.

**Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations of the Six Noted Strategy Categories According to Proficiency Levels**

| | Low (N=10) | | Middle (N=194) | | High (N=84) | | F | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **M** | **SD** | **M** | **SD** | **M** | **SD** | **F** | **df** | |
| **Memory** | 3.60 | 0.56 | 3.74 | 0.48 | 3.82 | 0.41 | 1.564 | 2 | .211 |
| **Cognitive** | 3.41 | 0.72 | 3.71 | 0.48 | 3.90 | 0.45 | 7.545 | 2 | .001 |
| **Compensation** | 3.22 | 0.73 | 3.46 | 0.63 | 3.79 | 0.57 | 9.348 | 2 | 000 |
| **Metacognitive** | 3.89 | 0.51 | 4.15 | 0.50 | 4.30 | 0.46 | 4.704 | 2 | .010 |
| **Affective** | 4.07 | 0.58 | 3.74 | 0.61 | 3.82 | 0.58 | 1.735 | 2 | .178 |
| **Social** | 3.98 | 0.89 | 4.11 | 0.59 | 4.29 | 0.46 | 3.425 | 2 | .034 |

* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level

Interestingly, the high and middle proficiency level groups favor meta-cognitive strategies, and this is similar to the findings in the frequency use of strategies in the six overall categories used by the students. As indicated earlier, this finding is significant because it shows that students with the higher proficiency level are able to take charge of their own learning. The evidence of a favored use of meta-cognitive strategies among the high proficiency level students found in this study supports the findings of previous studies (e.g., Aziz, 2005; Gharbavi & Mousavi, 2012; Hayati, 2015; Lee & Heinz, 2016; Peacock & Ho, 2003; Yang, 2010).

As presented before, the students in each proficiency level favor a certain strategy group or category. At the level of strategy items in the 50 SILL questionnaire, the findings of the present study also demonstrate that learners of certain proficiency levels favor certain strategy items, which is elaborated further in the next sub section.

**The Most and Least Used Strategy Items in the SILL according to Proficiency Levels**

In terms of the strategy items of the SILL, it has been noted that there are six most and six least used strategies according to the responses of the students involved in the study. This sub section is useful in providing more evidence about the approaches used by learners, in this case prospective English lan-

guage teachers, at different proficiency levels, especially the high proficiency one. Knowing about the preferences of learning strategies by the participants of different proficiency levels can potentially provide a model for the lower proficiency levels and can provide a model of strategy training for learners (Chamot, 2004; Gursoy, 2010; Idham 2014; Paredes, 2010).

To find the strategies that were the most and the least used by the participants from the three different proficiency levels, the mean scores of 50 SILL strategy items were ranked from the highest to the lowest in each proficiency level. Table 4 demonstrates the strategies and the highest mean score for each strategy item as chosen by the participants, according to their different proficiency levels.

**Table 4. The Associated Strategy Items Representing the Highest Mean Score Employed by Learners of Different Proficiency Levels**

| Proficiency Level | Strategy item | N | Mean | Std Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| High | SOC_I ask for help from people whose English is better than mine. | 10 | 4.65 | 0.55 |
| Middle | MET_I try to find out how to be a better learner of English. | 190 | 4.52 | 0.66 |
| Low | MET_I pay attention to when someone is speaking English. | 84 | 4.50 | 0.53 |

As can be seen from Table 4, *I ask for help from people whose English is better than mine* has the highest mean score for learners with a high proficiency level (M=4.65, SD=0.55). The highest mean score of the middle proficiency level is *I try to find out how to be a better learner of English* (M = 4.52, SD = 0.66). For learners with a low proficiency level, the associated strategy item with the highest main score is *I pay attention when someone is speaking English* (M = 4.50, SD = 0.53).

Interestingly, *paying attention* is mostly employed by the low proficiency level students and provides a similar finding to that of Wahyuni (2013) who conducted a study in Malang, Indonesia. Similarly, Chuin and Kaur (2015) found that *paying attention* was mostly employed by students in Malaysia when they learn English. It has been suggested by Yang (2010) that the high use of this strategy can be related to a teacher-directed and grammar emphasis in pedagogical practice. This resonates somewhat with teaching approaches in

Indonesia that are still in favor of teacher-centered learning. Such approaches tend to demand that students pay full attention to teacher driven explanation. This implies static or passive learning (Wahyuni, 2013) in which participants focus on the explanation from the teacher without asking questions because they are passive and shy. This is supported by the findings of other studies conducted within the Indonesian context (e.g., Exley, 2005; Lengkanawati, 2004; Suryanto, 2013) revealing that many Indonesian learners are passive and shy.

In terms of the strategies that are least used by the participants, the data in Table 5 demonstrate the strategies and the mean scores for the strategy items used by the participants in the three different proficiency levels.

**Table 5.  The Associated Strategy Items Representing the Lowest Mean Score Employed by Different Proficiency Levels**

| Proficiency Level | Strategy item | N | Mean | Std Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| High | AFF_I write down my feelings in a language-learning diary. | 10 | 2.80 | 1.29 |
| Middle | COM_I read English without looking up every new word. | 190 | 2.89 | 1.03 |
| Low | ST3Q4_I read English without looking up every new word. | 84 | 2.20 | 0.92 |

As can be seen from Table 5, *I read English without looking up every new word* is the strategy with the lowest mean score for participants with a low proficiency level (M=2.20, SD=0.92) and middle proficiency level (M = 2.89, SD = 1.03). The strategy with the lowest mean score in the high proficiency level is *I write down my feelings in a language-learning diary* (M = 2.80, SD = 1.29)

One of the most interesting findings in the use of strategy items in these three different proficiency levels was the least used strategy for the high proficiency learners: *I write down my feelings in a language-learning diary* (M = 2.80, SD = 1.29). This item is categorized as an affective strategy, and this is similar to the finding of Wahyuni (2013) who conducted a study on LLS in Malang, Indonesia (M = 1.86, SD = .96). This finding is also similar to that of Riazi and Khodadi (2007) who conducted a study in Saudi Arabia. They argued that the reason why the learners used this strategy the least is because it has been influenced by the cultural context. They also argued that Arab learners are

likely not to be self-expressive of their feelings and emotions, which may also be the reason why expressing feelings in language-learning diaries has the lowest mean score for high proficiency participants in the present study.

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study appear to support the literature in the field of language learning strategies in that learners with higher proficiency levels tend to employ more learning strategies. This means that LLS have a significant effect to the improvement of the language learner proficiency. Thus, teachers should encourage and train students to use many strategies and raise their awarenes of the many available strategies in language learning. Furthermore, teachers and curriculum designers are expected to design and develop curriculum involving activities which accomodate learner strategies, especially the meta-cognitive ones. Finally, considering that the participants of this study represent a group of experienced learners who, despite demonstrating that they use a broad range of LLS, are still concerned with finding new ways to best learn English, it is plausible to question whether they are using the identified strategies correctly and effectively. Further studies investigating learners' declarative, procedural, and conditional strategy knowledge are needed.

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